[Sea Chanties]

Tales-Anecdotes - Humorous Tales 2. Beliefs And Customs - Occupational Lore (Seamen)

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK [7?] Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 67th Place, Glendale, L.I.

DATE December 5, 1938

SUBJECT “Sea Chanties and a Heavy Stern”

1. Date and time of interview

11/17, 11 a.m.; 11/22, 11 a.m. 11/25, 11 a.m.; 11/29, 11 a.m.

2. Place of interview

The Sailors' Snug Harbor, Staten Island, N.Y.

3. Name and address of informant

Henry Perry, Sailors' Snug Harbor, S.I.,N.Y.

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

Captain Howard A. Flynn, Governor of Snug Harbor

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Note: A thousand-word description of Sailors, Snug Harbor accompanied my recent story: “Starbuck Perry, Hard-Boiled Mate.”

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NEW YORK

Form B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE December 5,1938

SUBJECT “Sea Chanties and a Heavy Stern”

1. Ancestry Colonial

2. Place and date of birth Brooklyn, N.Y. 1853

3. Family

No living relatives

4. Places lived in, with dates

Various seaport towns in the U.S.A. and in foreign countries

5. Education, with dates

Elementary

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Mariner

7. Special skills and interests

Seamanship

8. Community and religious activities

None

9. Description of informant Note: A five-hundred word description of this informant accompanied my recent story, “Starback Perry, Hard-boiled Mate.”

10. Other Points gained in interview

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 67th Place, Glendale, L.I.

DATE December 5, 1938

SUBJECT “Sea Chanties and a Heavy Stern” “And how do you know she's a Yankee clipper? Blow, boys blow. By the Stars and Stripes that float upon her - Blow, my bully boys, blow.”

Old Chantey.

Chantey-singing used to be an important part of the life of seamen on British and American sailing Ships, fifty and sixty years ago and longer. More so on the Britishers than on the American vessels; and there were reasons. Our ships always seemed to be in a bigger hurry, for one thing; and some skippers and mates thought chantey-singing was a waste of time, and only caused delay when you were hoisting up a topsail yard or rousing in the anchor. This was the cage especially with some of the ships that were changing crews all the time. Many of them had the name of being “work-houses.”

2

Limejuice ships, as the Britishers were called, were noted for “hunger and ease.” The men were fed much more poorly and worked not half an hard; they sang chanteys to their hearts' content. Another reason was that it often happened that an American ship sailed from port with a crew of men who had very few sailors among them. There were no better seamen afloat than American sailormen; but when there was a shortage of these, the crimps and boarding-house runners used to make it up by dumping a lot of saloon loafers and bar flies aboard; fellows who couldn't put two ends of a rope together. What did they know about singing chanteys? Then a ship got out at sea it took the mates all their time to chase those fellows around and make them help the honest-to-god seamen work the vessels.

English rules and regulations were more strict. Officers and men were better protected. You couldn't ship as an A.B. on a British ship unless you had a good discharge; that is, of

course, in a British port. If the crew of a Britisher deserted in an American port, or in any other foreign harbor, she had to replace them with whatever kind of men she could get - farm hands, tramps, tailors, wharf-rats or anything else. With a crew of that kind there wasn't much chantey-singing.

Negro seamen from the Southern states were great for chanties. They had fine voices and liked to sing; they were good sailors, too. Many of the most beautiful of these melodies originated in the South, and so did the words: such as “Roll the Cotton Down,” and the “Plains of Mexico,” and “Shenandoah,” and many others. I used to know them all. But on the other hand there were so many variations of the words that you would never hear them sung exactly alike by any two different singers.

3

Some fellows had good memories and could sing chanties and forecastle songs for hours at a time without running out of material. There were others who would make up many of their own words as they went along.

There were capstan chanties like “Rolling Home,” “Bound for Rio Grande,” and “No more we'll go a-roving.” Then there were chanties they used to sing at the old-style windlasses, and at the pumps when pumping the water out of the bilges, like “Up and Down in New York Town.” There were chanties for running up a topsail yard, and chanties when making and furling sail: “Ranzo,” “Blow, Boys, Blow,” and others. They seemed to lighten the labor, especially when you were hauling on a rope; at the same time, they helped you to pull all together at the same moment.

Sailors often made up a lot of profane words to fit into the old tunes, by way of variety. Sometimes they sang words to “kid” the mate or the skipper or the cook, in a sarcastic manner, criticizing the food or the hard work on, the harsh treatment, or all such things. One of these chanties was “Leave Her, Johnnie, Leave Her.” This one was sung, usually, when a vessel was making port at the end of a voyage. If it was sung while the ship was

out on the high seas, the captain knew very well it was meant for him, or that it was to call his attention to some grievance. No skipper felt very flattered to hear his men singing this chantey, but he couldn't very well say anything, so he had to grin and bear it or make believe he didn't hear. If he was a sore-head, and the ship was far enough away from port, he could got back at his men by giving them more work or poorer grub.

One of the greatest ships I was ever in, for chanties, was the American ship, Solitaire; Captain Ed. Sewell.

4

I spent three years in her; first as boatswain, then as second mate, and later as mate. Captain Sewell loved to bear chanteys, and I used to love to sing them. Sometimes we carried a few passengers, and then he always used to warn us to be careful of the words we sang. Some of them were not printable.

In the fall of 1888, while I was still boatswain of her, we made a passage from Liverpool to New York, carrying a general cargo and a few passengers who were quartered in state rooms in the after house, situated right close to the mizzen rigging. There was a doctor, his wife and her two sisters. They wanted to see what it was like to make an ocean trip in a sailing vessel, and for the first few days they seemed to be very well pleased with the experience. Then we ran into some bad weather: strong head winds and heavy seas; the passengers disappeared from sight and kept inside their rooms.

We were about a hundred miles to westward of the Irish coast when the wind freshened up into a gale. We got shortened down under lower topsails and lower staysails, and a double reefed foresail; and not being able to make any headway, beating against the wind, we [bove?] to and rode it out. We shipped quite a lot of water and had to wear our sea boots, oilskins and sou'-westers for several days. After awhile the wind eased off and shifted around to the north'ard, and the mate gave orders to set the upper topsails and shake the reefs out of the foresail.

Before we'd left Liverpool we'd ship shipped almost an entire new crew of men, mostly English and Scandinavians, and they were all pretty good sailors and knew their work. By the time we got the mizzen upper topsail loosed and started pulling on the halyards we had all forgotten about the passengers we had aboard. One of the Liverpool lads started up the chantey, “Blow the Man Down,” and he the words he sang to it were not exactly the kind that a lady teacher would want to sing in a church choir.

5

I don't remember, after all these years, how far he got with it, but I know it wasn't very far - two or three verses, maybe - when the mate came running aft.

“Hey, there!” he roared, “what in Hell's the matter with you fellows? Don't you know we've got women passengers aboard of this ship? I don't give a goddam what you sing in the forecastle, or any other place up for'ard; but keep a good watch on your mouth when you're working back aft here!”

Right behind the chanteyman there was a tough young Cockney from the Limehouse district of London. He was a good seaman and knew his work, and he was as hard as they make 'em. But the mate hadn't much use for him and he didn't care much for the mate. He says, “Wot the 'ell kind o' bleedin' langwidge does' he call that, to use back aft where the lydies can 'ear ' im ?”

Then, a minute later he says, “If 'e thinks this ship is a bloody Sunday School, why don't the old sod provide us with 'ymnbooks?”

For the rest of that passage we were very careful what chanteys we sang when working abaft the foremast.

* - — Talking of Western Ocean voyages, there was one passage I made from Liverpool to New York that I shall never forget. It was while I was in the American ship A.J. Fuller. I was boatswain of her at the time, and she was

commanded by Captain Colcord. The Fuller was a very fine ship, and her skipper a great seaman and navigator. If I recall, the vessel was built-in Bath, Maine, somewhere around 1880 or 1881.

When a man gets to be eighty-five his memory goes back on him sometimes. I can't think, for the moment, how long a time I stayed on that ship; and I can't remember the year of the rescue which I'm going to tell you about, but it was sometime in the eighties, I'm pretty sure.

6

I'll never forget that passage as long as I live, nor, the fat lady that we had to hoist aboard in a sling. She was one of the biggest women I've ever seen, and she was a good looker, too; about thirty or thirty-five years old. I never saw her after she went ashore in New York, and I don't suppose she's alive now, but I'll bet she remembered me for many a long day. She was very grateful for what I was able to do for her at the time.

The A.J. Fuller had made a smart passage across the Atlantic, and we were within about a day's sail of New York; a nice moderate breeze off the starboard quarter, and everything set, up to the top-gallant sails. About the middle of the afternoon watch we sighted a steamer's smoke, dead ahead of us; just a black smudge on the horizon. The rule of the road at sea gives a sailing vessel the right of way, so we kept on our course. We soon noticed that the smoke was getting blacker and more dense. Captain Colcord had been watching from the quarterdeck, and he took his glass and climbed up into the fore rigging. Very soon he came down and sang out to the second mate: “That ship's afire! Call the watch below, and have all hands get some boats ready to put over the side!”

While the second mate went to rouse out the port watch, the skipper hurried back aft to call the mate, and a few minutes later we were casting off the boat lashings and getting ready for launching. By this time we could see the outline of the steamer with the naked eye. She was ablaze, all right, and still dead ahead of us. Our skipper changed his course

about half a point to the north'ard, so that he would be able to come up with the steamer as close to windward as good judgement would allow him to do.

7

As the distance between us got shorter, we could see that she had launched some of her own boats; they were bobbing up and down in the water. We made fast some of our smaller sails, and clewed up the fore and mizzen courses just as we passed the steamer, a blazing volcano, a few hundred yards to leeward of us. Then, Captain Colcord brought the Fuller up into the wind, and we backed our main yard and stood by, while the boats with the passengers and crew of the doomed vessel rowed towards us. There were about five boatloads, if I remember right, and there were quite a number of women among the occupants.

While we waited we got up a lot of spare canvas from the sail locker and passed it down into the 'tween decks to make accommodations fore the shipwrecked people. The weather was quite cold, and we could see that the lifeboats were shipping a lot of spray. Our cook was busy in the galley making preparations to feed our unexpected guests, and the steward and one of / the ordinary seamen were getting extra provisions out of the store room. When the first boat pulled alongside and we made her painters fast we could see the passengers and crew were wet to the skin and shivering with cold. Some of the sailors had brought oilskins with them, and had taken them off to give to the women. Everyone looked half frozen. We had put a pilot ladder over the side, and, while some of the people climbed up on board, others were being hoisted up with a block [as?] and fall, to save time. I went down into the boat to help make 'em fast.

Before we got the first boat unloaded, the other ones were pulling in, and each one made fast alongside the previous one; so that the people had to step out of one boat into another by degrees. There was a tall man in the last boat with a long oilskin coat on him, and rubber boots and sou'wester. He was holding [?] on to something bulging out under his coat.

8

There were two or three women hear him - including the fat lady I told you about — and the few clothes they wore were soaking wet and sticking to the skin. I wanted to help the stout woman first and get her aboard the ship, out of the way; but she was too timid to move and said she would wait till the others went ahead. I bumped into the tall man accidentally, and he says; “Look out there, my man, for my chronometer; it cost a lot of money!”

“The Hell with your goddam, chronometer!” says I, “You can buy another one for a song, on South Street. Look at these women, wet to the skin and freezing to death; and you in an oilskin coat worrying over your blanky chronometer.” It was the steamboat's skipper. I didn't know it at the time; but I didn't give a damn, anyway, when he was acting in such an unseamanlike manner. Well, he didn't like my remarks, and he hollered up to Captain Colcord, who was standing- [at?] in the rain, “Captain,” he says, “this fellow here, in the blue shirt, is an animal.” Captain Colcord didn't answer a word, but I guess he thought plenty.

Only the fat lady and the skipper and two of the shipwrecked sailors were left in the outermost boat, and I and the other men helped the woman to step out of it into the next one, and so on till we got to the boat alongside the ship. Do you think she would put her foot on the pilot ladder? Not on your life! They passed me down a sling, and I made it fast to her. I took off my shirt and made a parceling around the rope, so that it wouldn't chafe her skin when they pulled a strain on the tackle fall; and when all was ready my lady was hoisted aboard like a sack of potatoes. Five minutes later, the boats were out adrift, every living soul safe aboard the A.H. Fuller and heading towards New York.

9

Meanwhile the officers and crew of the steamer bad been pretty well distributed among those of our own ship, doubling up in the forecastle and in the mates' rooms. The passengers had been made as comfortable as possible in the 'tween decks, special care

having been taken of the women, who were housed in the shelter of a big sail, rigged up somewhat in the fashion of a circus tent. Other sails made similar canopies for the men, and also served a good purpose as carpets, beds and coverings.

Our captain had his wife with him, and she quickly ransacked her personal belongings for extra towels, blankets and articles of clothing for the women. She showed them every kindness and consideration, and they certainly appreciated her hospitality.

While I had been helping to got the people out of the lifeboats, the boatswain of the steamer had been assigned to double up with me, in my room; but when I climbed aboard I suggested to him that we should sleep in the men's quarters in the 'tween decks, and let the fat lady have the benefit of a room to herself. He readily agreed, and made his way down below, while I hustled the poor woman into the room — she was numb from cold and exposure. I got a pannikin of hot coffee from the galley and brought it in to her. Her hands were so stiff she could hardly lift it to her lips, and she was shaking all over as if she had the ague. I was afraid she was going to catch her death of cold.

After she drank the coffee, she still was shaking, and I says, “Lady, I've got to dry you off, or you won't be conscious when we reach New York.” So I took the wet clothes off her, and went to work on her with a rough towel. God! She was fat. The shirt I took off her back was big enough to make a mainsail for a ship.

10

I had to strip her naked as the day she was born. I dried her good, to get the blood in circulation. Boy! I holystoned her from stem to stern, and rubbed her down from truck to kelson. I attempted to put one of my own shirts on her, but I might as well have saved the time; so I wrapped one of my blankets around her and went to the galley for more coffee and a plate of some salt beef hash the cook had made. How she piled into it! I figured that she was out of danger now, and I ate some supper with her. Then I rolled her into my bunk and covered her up with all the extra clothes I had to spare, and wished her good-night. I

took her wet clothing out on deck with me and hang it up in the rigging, where it soon dried in the breeze. Next morning I returned it to her and took her some breakfast. She said she was feeling fine, and none the worse for her experience in the open boats.

When we dropped anchor in the New York Harbor, the passengers and crew of the steamer were taken ashore in a tug boat. They had tears of gratitude in their eyes, and they said no finer skipper than Captain Colcord ever trod a quarterdeck. Just as my big lady was leaving she says to me: “Boatswain, I shall never forget your kindness. Only for the first aid you gave me I might have caught bronchitis or pneumonia, or maybe consumption.”

Well, Sir, I shall never forget that woman. I've never seen but one other such a stern in all my travels; and that one was on a barge in the Thames River.

[md]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012 67th Place, Glendale, L.I.

DATE December 5, 1938

SUBJECT “Sea Chanties and a Heavy Stern”

Henry Perry, the “ancient mariner' from whom I received the details of this narrative, is a colorful and very interesting old gentleman, rich in life experiences in general, and in the lore of the sea particularly. Great care has to be taken not to exhaust him, because of his great age. There are times when his memory appears to be excellent and when he seems to take delight in rehearsing stories of his wild and adventurous career; when he can recall, apparently without effort, names of persons, places and ships, to say nothing of dates. There are other times when his physical infirmities weigh so heavily upon him that it is the part of kindness and discretion to refrain from attempting to induce him to enter into conversation. He never complains. He is always friendly, and always eager to oblige with a tale; so much so that an undiscerning interviewer easily might impose an unintentional burden on a man whose physical courage and mental fortitude, alike, evoke the highest admiration.